

GUNVOR NELSON, San Francisco Cinematheque October 20

The films of Gunvor Nelson are saturated with a restless, offhand elegance. The precision of her editing gives even the most arbitrary image a persuasive inevitability. The show was a premiere of two works in black and white, both photographed in the United States and Nelson's native Sweden. Frame Line, 22 min., is a kind of kinetic flip through a tourist's album of Stockholm. Still and motion photography are altered chemically and through frantic, gestural painting,

making for dizzying changes in texture and depth. It is almost a game of multi-layered techniques, as if done by a kid artist locked in a formalist candy store. These are clearly excerpts from Nelson's experience, but she seems unsure where to place the quotation marks, constantly changing her mind about how to filter her material. She superimposes titles of ambiguous meaning which obfuscate rather than clarify and add to a general feeling of sadness. Perhaps the most recent visit to Sweden was not altogether a happy one. "Greetings from" one title exclaims, and a bottle quietly breaks on the soundtrack. At certain points a jigsaw

puzzle is plainly used as a metaphor, but the film is more like completing such a puzzle backwards: the repetition of certain shapes allows a wide variety of possible solutions.

In these films Nelson does a remarkable thing in that she nearly overcomes the normal anticipatory nature of film narrative structure. Rather, her sounds and images refer to their own and their subject's pasts, as the narrative structure of still photography does. This is achieved beautifully in Red Shift, a 50 minute evocation of three generations of women in a family, executed with unrelenting intimacy. Few of the subjects are what we imagine as intensely personal, however. It is the tender, private intimacy of the camera's relationship to the women and their surroundings which give a majestic and startling candidness to something as everyday as an old woman's favorite hairbrush. Toward the end of the film there were images that I immediately read as menstrual blood on a towel and flowing semen, even though superficially there was nothing to indicate that this is what I was seeing. Such is the figurative and literal closeness of the camera, a closeness which makes the human interaction general and meaningful to everyone. We never have the feeling of spying on a particular family that does not include us. At several points mother and daughter wade through a jewelry box full of both paste and gaudy heirlooms: material objects as the eternal neutral meeting ground for otherwise often adversarial female generations. This universality is emphasized by poignant quotations on the soundtrack from letters written

by Calamity Jane Hickock, of all people, to her distant daughter. The first reading of the title refers to the change in spectral lines as luminous bodies hurtle away from us in space. But, as Nelson made clear in her comments after the program, other meanings of "shift" are also appropriate, a time period of working, for instance, or a piece of lingerie. Red Shift captures, delights in, the complex and sometimes contradictory feelings within the family and its relationships.

- James Irwin
San Francisco

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